

BARREL-STAVE BRONCO

Story and pictures
by Don O'Brien

The author calls for a revival by adventure minded youngsters of this old and honored winter sport, jumper riding, thought to have originated in Vermont but fast on its way to oblivion.

Last winter Col. W. M. Tenney, then Post Commander at Fort Ethan Allen and now retired, revived his earlier interest in jumper riding. He made a basic model in his shop in twenty minutes. Here he shows Robert L. Wilson of Burlington how to ride.

SOMEWHERE in Vermont a lot of years ago a farm boy peeked over the edge of the comforter at the white square of his window. What he saw made him bound from the snug depths of his feather mattress to gaze with glee at the ermine cape with which the night had draped his favorite hillside haunt.

The lad tarried but briefly, then hastily put on his clothes and rushed out to make the first tracks in the fluffy white snow.

In the yard, his reconnoitering eye took in the sprawling skeleton of a collapsed barrel. He looked at one of the loosened staves, he glanced again at the slope, changed into a thrilling new world by the first magic touch of winter.

Stave . . . Hill . . . youth's genius put the two together. And thus was born that leaping, bucking, coasting device which the young 'uns of my day knew as the jumper.

This history, of course, is imaginative. It's doubtful if anyone can say just when and how the saga of the stave began. But it must have been something like that.

I like to picture the youngster snatching up the barrel stave and rushing to the shed for hammer, nails and supplementary pieces of wood with which to materialize his idea.

And I like to think that he bore, as I once did, the black and blue mementos of his first bewildering ride.

The jumper, or jack-jump or scooter or schooner, as I've learned it was variously called in different communities, was a live thing, a critter of moods and contrariness. It had a yen for picking its own route and destination, at least until the rider was able to prove himself the boss. And that took time . . . and bruises.

I remember the first one I made. Not enough nails . . . or nails not long enough, hasty bracing, a wobbly seat. My masterpiece became but a little pile of wood under me at the foot of the gully slope where I first tried it out. But I was an unusually fortunate lad. Our house was strategically located next door to the blacksmith shop in Burlington, run by the late and beloved John Collins, before



he retired to his farm and Assistant Judgeship.

I gathered up what was left of my handiwork and took it into Mr. Collins' shop. That, neighbors, was a place of magic. And the brawny magician, himself, whose cloak was a leather apron, looked at it and chuckled.

He picked up a metal strip and went to his anvil. I came out with a rugged stave-steed that could take the bumps—even if it often lost me on the first one.

From now on, to save words, I'll call the contrivance a jumper. You, who knew it by another name, can do your own translating.

By any name, there was something about those rampant, unruly and head-strong contraptions that left shiny new sleds and slick, squatty toboggans propped against outbuildings and trees in impatient idleness.

Maybe it was the challenge of that self-willed wooden individualist, which jeered, "come on, sonny, I'm tough—let's see how tough *you* are." For what Vermont boy would have it said that he'd been licked by a mere barrel stave with a seat? "You just wait," he'd vow, "I'll make you behave."

When you finally got the knack of the thing, there came a feeling of mastery. You had to learn just how to sway your body, to manipulate your legs and feet, and the lessons came the hard way.

But the bumps and bruises paid off gloriously, for, to scoot down a steep slope with the frosty wind whipping your face, to come to rest right side up and wave back in triumph to the admiring lads and lasses at the crest—there was a thrill of thrills!

The jumper belonged to the days of jingling sleigh bells and the frosted breath and bobbing heads of horses with snow flying from their hoofs. It was a part of the era of laden traverses flying down the police-protected hill streets of cities and towns; of winter sport carnivals on Lake Champlain, with fancy skating and lofty toboggan slides; the years before elaborately mechanized ski resorts, when folks made their own fun in the snow right close to home.

After the stave-runner jumper came into being, alert manufacturers saw the light and began to turn out what we knew as the store kind. They were colorful, machine-turned things, with iron braces, steel runners and a wide variety of painted design. The runners were narrow and had more of the gripping power of those on a sled.

But they lacked the element of wildness which the barrel stave inherited from its

parents of the timberlands. Store jumpers had little of the deviltry and cussedness which gave the home-made product its personality. The difference was somewhat like that between a patient nag and a spirited colt.

Maybe the jumper will come back. Any red-blooded youngster would need only to try it to become intrigued with the adventure of the thing.

I can think of no more hilarious event than a jumper derby to liven up a winter holiday carnival. None of those store sissies in this. No, homemade by the lads themselves, the racing vehicles should be, for the building is a lesson in craftsmanship.

Yes, neighbors, I'd like to watch a lot of kids compete in a jumper race down a steep, natural slope. Watch it, I said. END

Above: Col. Tenney, not to be outdone by his young friend, shows that he can still master the tricky steed. Below: Robert, 13-years old, finds the difficult technique of riding the animated barrel stave combines the knack of skiing with unicycle balancing—not learned in one ride alone. Factory style jumpers were made in Worcester and Readsboro.

